Surviving World's Fairs, Depressions, and World War II

By: Dale C. Maley
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The first Fairbury Fair was held back in 1876, which was 145 years ago. Since its inception, the Fairbury Fair has only been canceled seven times.

John Virgin (1838-1900) was a Civil War veteran and a Fairbury businessman. He specialized in importing large Percheron draft horses from France. John sold these horses to Fairbury area farmers. John Virgin was very active in the Fairbury Fair and the Illinois State Fair. He was also President of the American Percheron Association.

Because of John's extensive agricultural experience, the governor of Illinois appointed John Virgin to design and built the agricultural exhibit at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition. This event is often called the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.

Many Fairbury area residents attended the Chicago World's Fair by taking a passenger train to Chicago. Fairbury's wealthiest citizen, Thomas A. Beach, traveled to the Chicago World's Fair. Mr. Beach was estimated to have had a net worth of over $50 million when he died in 1911. His "Lion House" home still stands on East Hickory Street. Because the Chicago World's Fair was such a popular event, no Fairbury Fair was held in 1893.

In October of 1929, the Stock Market crashed and ended the Roaring Twenties. This stock market crash was the start of a ten-year-long Great Depression in the United States. Unemployment quickly soared to about 25 percent of the workforce. Bread lines became common in the big cities.

In 1931, the organizers of the fair reviewed the expenses of past fairs. They decided they needed to raise $2,500 before they conducted the fair. Mr. J. P. Cook was put in charge of the citizen's committee to raise the $2,500. When only $925 could be raised, J. P. Cook announced that the decision had been made not to have a 1931 Fairbury Fair because of general financial and business conditions.

As economic conditions further deteriorated during the Great Depression, officials decided there would be no Fairbury Fair in 1932 and 1933. The Fairbury Fair finally resumed in 1934.

About three months after the 1941 Fairbury Fair, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, initiating World War II. Fairbury supported the World War II effort by sending many men and women to serve in the military. Fairbury businesses sold war bonds, and local citizens bought them to finance the war. Rationing of many commodities, including food, gasoline, and tires, was introduced to support the war effort. Numerous scrap drives were conducted to collect metal, which could be reprocessed into military weapons.

Because of the World War II effort, the decision was made not to have Fairbury Fairs in 1942 and 1943. On June 6, 1944, D-Day, the most massive amphibious attack in the history of the world, was successfully conducted by Allied Forces. Because the war was going well by the summer of 1944, the decision was made to hold a 1944 Fairbury Fair.

Because it had been three years since the last Fairbury Fair, the event organizers wanted to put on a spectacular show. They booked a previous act that had been very popular with fair-goers, B. Ward Beam's International Congress of Daredevils. Some of their thrillers included the "Dive Bomber Crash," "Tunnel of Fire," and "Dynamite Drive," which involved crashing into a solid brick wall with an auto. Several dancing companies were also booked as entertainment and a female skating act called "the Rollateers."

In the winter of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread throughout the world quickly. Ordinary life was shut down in the United States for several months as citizens remained isolated in their homes. However, by the summer months, businesses and institutions gradually started a slow reopening process.

Because of the pandemic virus, all outdoor events with large numbers of attendees were canceled to minimize the spread of the virus. After much research, the Fairbury Fair organizers decided to cancel the fair and resume it in 2021.

The Fairbury Fair has survived a competing World's Fair in 1893, the Great Depression in the 1930s, and World War II in the 1940s. Organizers plan to resume the Fairbury Fair in 2021. Hopefully, the Fairbury Fair will continue to survive future catastrophic events and provide entertainment to many more generations of Fairbury citizens.

Fairbury Fair circa 1919

This old photo was colorized using Fotor.com.

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